

Tribune

EAST VALLEY • SCOTTSDALE

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Getting There: South Mtn. Freeway appears to be pipe dream

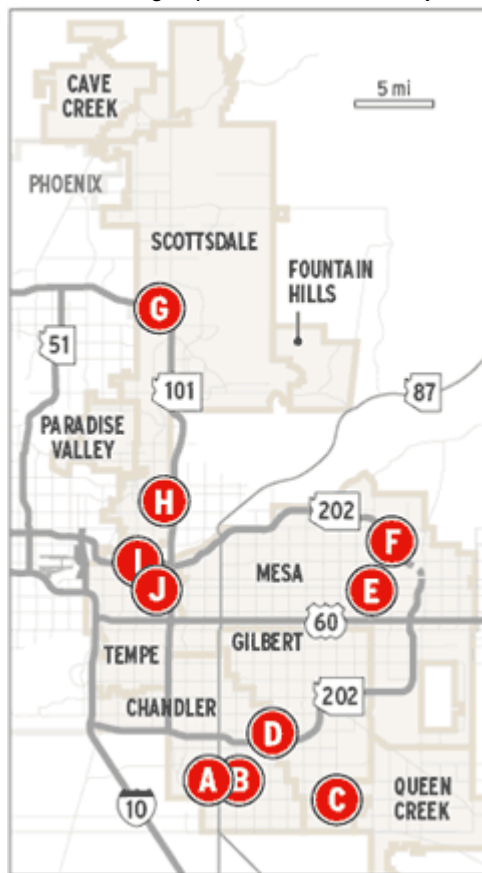
By Mike Branom
Tribune

"We're on a road to nowhere, come on inside/Takin' that ride to nowhere, we'll take that ride." - Talking Heads

In a little more than two weeks, the last stretch of Loop 202 Red Mountain Freeway in east Mesa will open to traffic. When the rubber meets the rubberized road, the Valley can finally boast a complete freeway system.

Sort of.

Click to view a map of road work in the Valley
[<http://www.eastvalleytribune.com/page/image?filename=images/photos/2008/06/28/xdjkh9m9.gif>]



Last week, I attended a meeting between the Arizona Department of Transportation and residents of Ahwatukee Foothills, home to the eastern segment of the proposed Loop 202 South Mountain Freeway.

For decades, transportation planners have desired a highway around the south side of South Mountain, directly connecting the East Valley with west Phoenix. No longer would cross-country traffic get caught in the gridlock of downtown, the experts said, to the relief of other Valley highways.

But the freeway has been delayed by funding problems (price tag of \$1.7 billion and rising) and vehement opposition. The planners and residents hadn't met in years, and I couldn't figure what had changed since then.

"ADOT still wants it and the people still hate it, so what's the point of this meeting?" I asked beforehand of some of the combatants, er, participants.

There wasn't a point. Instead, it was simply scores of angry residents voicing by turns good questions, shortsighted NIMBYism and, in one appalling case, condescending racism. That would be the guy who said the adjacent Gila River Indian Community should be treated "like children" with the freeway forced upon their land.

(Rep. John McComish, R-Ahwatukee Foothills, acquitted himself well as moderator by responding with a polite smackdown.)

It's looking more like this freeway will never get built. It appears there is neither the political will nor the money.

[<http://www.eastvalleytribune.com/page/image?filename=images/photos/2008/06/28/xdjkh9m9.gif>] And that's why, when writing about the Red Mountain Freeway's grand opening, I'm declaring construction on the local highway network to be over.

GILBERT IN THE MIDST OF TRAFFIC SIGNAL SURGE

By 2010, Gilbert officials expect the town to have 192 traffic signals.

And more than 60 of those signals will have been recent additions.

"So in 2010, about 39 percent of the town's signals will have been put up in the most recent three years," said Gilbert spokesman Garin Groff.

It's a drastic jump since the town put in its first traffic light at Gilbert and Elliot roads back in 1971. The town's second light didn't go in until 1984 when Gilbert added one at Gilbert and Guadalupe roads.

By 1999, Gilbert still had less than 50 signals.

But the town has been putting up the signals, which run up to \$300,000, at major intersections at relatively breakneck speeds since around 2004. That was the year Gilbert installed its 80th traffic signal.

Most of the 30 signals installed in the last 18 months are new, though a handful are upgrades where an extra turn lane has been added.

The same will hold true for the next 33 expected to be installed in the next 18 months.

And while crews are trying to keep up with getting new lights at major intersections, residents in some established neighborhoods are pushing for signals where their smaller streets intersect with arterials.

"Some of that is just how the town has grown in recent years," Groff said.

CLOSURES AND RESTRICTIONS

Southbound traffic will be restricted to one lane on Higley Road, from south of Ray Road to Vest Avenue.

All four directions at Higley and Germann roads will be restricted, with no left turns allowed for northbound or southbound traffic on Higley.

Traffic will be restricted to one lane on eastbound Guadalupe Road between McQueen and Cooper roads.

Queen Creek Road is closed from Arizona Avenue to McQueen Road through Sept. 28 while crews widen the road to six lanes.

Queen Creek Road between Crismon and Signal Butte roads remains closed while crews continue work on the Gilbert Central Arizona Project waterline.

Crews will be working on street improvements in the area of Chandler Heights and Hawes roads.

Ellsworth Road between Germann and Queen Creek roads will be closed next weekend for street widening. Traffic will be detoured for this closure using Rittenhouse, Sossaman and Germann roads.



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